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PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM  
DE RUEHPF #2172/01 3451113  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 111113Z DEC 06  
FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7709  
INFO RUEHXS/ASEAN COLLECTIVE  
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PHNOM PENH 002172

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FOR EAP/MLS, DRL and EAP/RSP

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [CB](#)

SUBJECT: PM'S BODYGUARD LEADS MONKS IN PATH TOWARDS HARMONIOUS  
SUPPORT FOR CPP

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Hing Bun Heang, the Commander of the Prime Minister's Personal Bodyguard Unit, was appointed in September 2006 as Supreme Consultant to a newly formed Monk Assembly, which is designed to investigate and resolve disputes involving monks across Cambodia. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) announced Bun Heang's appointment shortly after Cambodia's most senior Buddhist monk reversed his 2002 ban prohibiting all monks from voting. Observers believe Hing Bun Heang's appointment is designed to monitor the activities of monks who do not support the CPP, and stifle opposition political activity among Cambodia's main religious body. End Summary.

Hing Bun Heang's Role in a Monk Assembly  
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¶2. (SBU) According to a September 6, 2006 subdecree, Hun Sen appointed General Hing Bun Heang, Commander of the PM's Personal Bodyguard Unit, to be the Supreme Consultant to a newly formed Monk Assembly. Bun Heang said in an October 24 press report that his role in the religious council would be to advise the assembly on conflict resolution. He added he was appointed to the post because of his experience with Buddhist principles, although Post notes there is no evidence he has been ordained and served as a monk.

¶3. (SBU) Bun Heang was appointed as Supreme Consultant two weeks after the Government approved the formation of a Monk Assembly upon a request from Venerable Tep Vong, Supreme Patriarch of Buddhist Monks. The PM's subdecree issued on August 24, 2006, approved the formation of a Monk Assembly which, according to Article 1, is designed to act as the supreme organization to settle all disputes related to Buddhism in Cambodia. Article 2 states that the Assembly is led by a composition of eight ranking monks from different pagodas in and around Phnom Penh. The assembly reportedly will function like a court; it will investigate and adjudicate conflicts among monks or between monks and laymen across Cambodia.

¶4. (SBU) Hing Bun Heang's appointment comes shortly after Tep Vong's August 2006 directive lifting his June 2002 prohibition on monks' voting in elections. On November 29, this ban was formally lifted during the annual Buddhist Monk Congress in Phnom Penh; during this same Congress, Tep Vong warned monks against participating in any mass political movement critical of the government.

¶5. (SBU) There is some recent history of monks clashing with their political and religious leaders. In early 2003, the head monk of the historic Wat Lanka, Sam Bun Thoeun, was shot dead near his pagoda after he encouraged monks to register to vote in defiance of Tep Vong's ban. A few years earlier, some monks were severely injured by police who used violence to disperse a rally in Phnom Penh protesting the 1998 election results. Four monks were listed among 53 victims of "politically motivated disappearances" after those same demonstrations.

## Comments from Another Member of the Assembly

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¶16. (SBU) Venerable Chhoeung Bun Chhear, one of the eight senior monks in the new Monk Assembly and Director of Supreme Patriarch Tep Vong's Cabinet, compared the function of the Assembly to the Supreme Court in Cambodia. Bun Chhear stated that the Assembly was formed to settle disputes between monks and lay people in the Mohanikay sect. He could not answer why Hing Bun Heang had been named to the assembly. (Note: Cambodian Theravada Buddhism is composed of two sects: Mohanikay and Thamayuthikak Nikay. Tep Vong leads the Mohanikay sect which manages the vast majority of monks and pagodas in Cambodia. Bou Kry, a mentor of King Sihamoni, leads the Thamayuthikak Nikay sect, which is primarily confined to the religious affairs of the royal family. The monk assembly will oversee only the Mohanikay monks. End Note.)

## SRP MP Voices Concern

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¶17. (SBU) Opposition Sam Rainsy Party MP Ho Vann believes Bun Heang's appointment was politically motivated and designed to maintain CPP control over Cambodia's most prominent religious order. The Phnom Penh MP commented that Bun Heang's appointment, as well as the work of the Assembly, could become a concern for Buddhist monks who do not support the ruling CPP. If embroiled in disputes, Ho Van warned that anti-CPP monks could be targeted by the Assembly and the Consultant. According to Ho Van, a sizeable number of monks in both urban and rural areas support the SRP. He further explained that some head monks permit human rights NGOs to use their pagodas for meetings; Bun Heang's appointment could be an attempt to stop this practice. The Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) had staged public forums at pagodas, but Tep Vorn ordered all pagodas off limits for political purposes in late 2004/early 2005.

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¶18. (SBU) With respect to the eight-member composition of the Assembly, Ho Van said at least three members - Chhoeung Bun Chhear, Noy Chhrek, and Moung Ra - are CPP supporters. Tep Vong, himself, is the former Vice-President of the People's Republic of Kampuchea, the name of the country in the early 1980s under Vietnamese occupation. He recently asked monks to thank the CPP for liberating Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge.

¶19. (SBU) Concerning the voter registration period that ended on October 24, Ho Van estimated approximately 10% of monks in Phnom Penh were registered to vote for the coming elections, compared with 90% in the countryside. Regarding the discrepancy, Ho Van said many head monks in Phnom Penh pagodas had not permitted monks under their supervision to register; monks need their monk ID card as well as residence permits to register. Whereas, monk ID cards are easily obtainable, head monks may be slow or reluctant to issue or update residence documents.

## Civil Society Echos Concerns on Appointment

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¶10. (SBU) Though he regarded the creation of a Monk Assembly as a positive development, Kul Panha, Executive Director of the Committee of Free and Fair Elections (COMFREL), stated that Hing Bun Heang's appointment could be intimidating to monks and discourage them from participating in politics. Hang Punthear, Director of the Neutral, Impartial, Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (NICFEC), added that Bun Heang cannot be a neutral party in politically-related conflicts.

¶11. (SBU) Punthear went on to add he has been told that 20 monks living in Svay Pope Pagoda were unable to register to vote when the head monk failed to issue them residence certificates. Puthear stated that he was told the head monk is a CPP supporter and wanted the monks to join the CPP; however, the 20 monks refused to do so. The Monk Assembly is charged with judging conflicts such as these -- but with a politically aligned composition, neutral judgments will

be unlikely.

Comment

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¶12. (SBU) Post will monitor the development of this new monk institution but Hing Bun Heang's affiliation to it is disturbing. We concur with sources who believe that the CPP intends to keep firm control over potential political agitation within the main Buddhist religious order like all other important national institutions in Cambodia. End Comment.

¶13. (SBU) Bio note: In late 2005, Hing Bun Heang filed a lawsuit against Sam Rainsy's wife Tiouloung Saumura and former SRP Secretary-General Eng Chhay Eang, for their alleged roles in the

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distribution of a DVD that implicated Hing Bun Heang in the 1997 grenade attack against Rainsy and other opposition protesters across from the National Assembly. The case is still pending at Phnom Penh Municipal Court but Post has learned that government lawyers have agreed to take no further action in the case.

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